

TENSIONS IN APOSTOLIC PRAYER

By JAMES WALSH

A RECENT assessment of the christian vocation in the modern world, which has particular reference to religious orders of women engaged in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy (nursing and education), has drawn fresh attention to the alleged incompatibility between the traditional spirituality of the West and the apostolic life. 'A purely contemplative spirituality' it is said, 'has had gradually imposed on it a spirituality more nearly directed at action, but the balance between the life of prayer and the life of the apostolate has never been fully attained at the spiritual level itself'.¹ It is true that the great monastic teachers tended to see the works of the apostolate, no matter how necessary and pleasing to God, in terms of a distraction, a relaxing of the contemplative effort. The single christian purpose is union with God in Christ, and the single means to union, the contemplation of God through Christ: 'so that as we come to know God in visible form, we may be caught up through him to the love of things invisible'.² Normally speaking, the christian vocation, they seem to say, can be achieved only by the subordination of all human activity – those many things that troubled Martha – to the 'one thing necessary', the quiet and withdrawn contemplation of Mary.³

It is, however, significant that those who have written most surely and magisterially on the necessity of withdrawal and aloofness from the world in order to achieve the requisite physical conditions for contemplative prayer, were themselves immersed, for long periods at a time, in direct and intense apostolic activity.⁴ Their lives implicitly confirm what their writings and their predilections are so reluctant to concede: the contemplative spirit and training, and

¹ Léon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Nun in the World* (London 1962), p. 44.

² The Christmas Preface.

³ Cf. C. Butler O.S.B., *Western Mysticism* (2nd ed. London 1951), part II 'The Contemplative and Active Lives' *passim*.

⁴ This is true of each of the figures treated specifically by Butler (*loc. cit.*). Other great names, such as Bonaventure and Teresa of Avila, spring readily to mind.

the practice of unitive prayer, are in fact the ideal preparation for and the only possible sustenance of truly fruitful apostolic activity. The reason is not far to seek. The contemplative life, as Cardinal Suenens reminds us, 'corresponds to the duty of direct adoration and is centred on the liturgical life – *Opus Dei*'.¹ It is Christ himself whose earthly life fulfilled that duty to perfection – human perfection. His adoration, his dedication consisted in 'doing what he sees his Father doing',² in deciding as he is 'bidden to decide',³ in speaking as 'my Father has instructed me to speak; for he who sent me is with me; he has not left me all alone, since what I do always pleases him'.⁴ When all the distinctions between action and contemplation are drawn, when all the theorising about schools and kinds of spirituality are over and done with; whether we define the perfection of the apostolic life with Thomas Aquinas as 'handing on the fruits of contemplation', or as 'contemplative in action' with Ignatius Loyola, we must return to Christ as he is revealed to us in the gospels and the apostolic preaching. We are his apostles only in so far as he is with us, in so far as we do what we see him doing, in so far as we pray and do with him.

It is possible to be a contemplative without engaging in the direct apostolate, because the very submission and renunciation demanded by a life dedicated to contemplation in solitude, as well as the interior mortification involved in contemplative prayer, mean a sacrifice equivalent to martyrdom.⁵ But it is not possible to engage in the direct apostolate without being a contemplative, without a conscious awareness of and submission to the divine will. We must be aware of oneness with Christ, as he was aware of oneness with his Father. Our activity is truly apostolic only in so far as we permit him to work in us and through us, with the consciousness of his power and his desire. And the apostle, in his search for union in action, must be even more on his guard against illusion than the *ex professo* contemplative. The consequences of mistaking self-will for God's will in our work are much more far-reaching than mistakenly to consider that we are receiving special graces in prayer. The indispensable contemplative virtues of obedience to direction, humility and purity of heart are even more indispensable for the

¹ Suenens, *loc. cit.*

² Jn 5, 19.

³ Jn 5, 30.

⁴ Jn 8, 28.

⁵ Ignatius Loyola remarks that the perfect obedience of the apostle, itself a blind sight of the divine will, is a continual martyrdom.

apostle; and they come to all alike in the same way: through the contemplation of Christ.

Inevitably, then, the training of the apostle is the way of contemplative purification, the weaning away from the world which Paul describes to his Philippians: 'All that once stood to my credit, I now write down as loss, for the love of Christ . . . for love of him I have lost everything, treat everything as refuse, in order to have Christ to my credit . . . him I would learn to know, and what it means to share his sufferings, moulded into the pattern of his death'.¹ Nor is the moment ever reached when the apostle can say 'I am now free of the world and in possession of Christ'. He can never claim that he is so at one with Christ that he always sees clearly what Christ's will is and is fully aware of Christ's strength in the performance of it. Rather his turning from the world and himself to Christ is a rhythmic movement, constantly repeated. 'I have not yet reached perfection . . . forgetting what is behind me, and reaching out for what lies ahead, I press towards the goal'.² This is the extent to which the apostle, who must be in the world as Christ is in the world, must constantly keep himself aloof from the world. The apostle is not immune from 'the witchery of vanities which obscure the good',³ any more than the contemplative is immune from the attractions of sensible consolations. The same mortification and detachment is demanded of the apostle as of the contemplative: the same independence of all which is not Christ.

The Church in her wisdom insists, in the case of the active religious as well as of the contemplative, that this interior withdrawal and detachment have their exterior counterpart, in the shape of some form of enclosure and religious habit, which symbolise being in Christ and putting on Christ. It is inevitable that such symbols should sometimes appear as a barrier between the apostle and the world in which he has been called to labour for Christ. But it would be a mistake to conclude, merely because of over-insistence on these symbols or an excessive attachment to them in religious communities of women, that the traditional contemplative training and purification are undesirable for those called to the apostolic vocation. At the same time, it is easy to see how an inordinate affection for or insistence on the symbols will tend to elevate the interior separation to the status of an end in itself, instead of merely a means to complete attachment to and absorption in Christ: with a consequent cleavage

¹ Phil 3, 7-10.

² Phil 3, 12-13.

³ Wis 4, 12.

between prayer, identified with the symbol and the withdrawal, and apostolic action, seemingly fruitful only when these restraints on freedom are removed.

‘Make thyself a model of speech and behaviour for the faithful, all love, all faith, all purity . . . Two things claim thy attention, thyself and the teaching of the faith; spend thy care on them; so wilt thou and those who listen to thee achieve salvation’.¹ This instruction of Paul to Timothy underlines another source of anxiety in the life of the apostle, another cause of tension in his prayer: the apparent opposition between growth in personal holiness and intense apostolic activity. For many religious, personal sanctity comes to be identified with the meticulous fulfilment of rule, a sanctity which is itself seen as the essential requisite for a fruitful apostolate. Thus when it happens that the demands of the apostolate and the exact performance of the spiritual duties prescribed by rule meet head-on, as they so often must in the modern context, the prayer of the religious tends to become a hurried routine-fulfilment. There is a reluctance on the part of superiors to dispense from spiritual duties, a fear that they are encouraging slackness and reversing the order of priorities: and where such dispensations are reluctantly granted, there is the complementary fear in the subject that the essential is being omitted for the sake of the accidental: that whilst we preach to others, we are ourselves becoming castaways. These fears and tensions, it is sometimes alleged, are a direct result of the old spirituality, which insists so strongly that all contact with ‘the world’ dissipates and defiles.

Whilst it is true that certain spiritual classics, like the *Imitation of Christ*, seem to lay too much stress on flight from the world, there is an equal lack of proportion in the view of those critics (inside as well as outside the cloister) who contend that religious life in the context of the modern apostolate needs to be remodelled completely. Traditional spirituality has its roots in a catechesis which postulates the incarnate Christ as the rule of life for *all* christians, no matter what their specific calling. The christian is to share Christ’s transformation of the world by his very presence in the world; but the pattern of preparation for the apostolate of action is Christ’s contemplation of his Father’s will at Nazareth, his detachment from his mother and home at the beginning of his public life, and his

¹ 1 Tim 4, 12, 16.

prayer and fasting in the solitude of the desert. Through this preparation and in the Christ-like attitude it must impart, Christ's prayer for all his apostles finds its answer: 'I am not asking that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from evil. They do not belong to the world, as I, too, do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth. Even as thou hast sent me into the world, so I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified through the truth'.¹

'For their sakes I sanctify myself'. It is in and for the whole Christ that the apostle, from the first moment of his vocation, seeks the holiness of Christ. The apostle's goal, the end of the religious order dedicated to Christ's work in the world, is a particular application and not a violation of the great commandment 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . and thy neighbour as thyself'. The apostle does not seek his own sanctification, and then, or secondarily, the sanctification of others. Like Timothy, we are to be all love, all faith, all purity for the sake of those to whom we are sent. And once we have learnt first to seek God and his word – the truth which sanctifies – our contacts with the world, our love of creatures is itself transformed into the means of union. The Christ whom we seek in purification and detachment is he whom we find in understanding and love. Since holiness is union with Christ who is the 'radiance of his Father's splendour and the full expression of his Father's being' in prayer and action alike, there is no difference between the holiness of the contemplative and that of the apostle; the same Christ contemplates and finds union with the Father's will both in the prayer of the agony and the active compassion with the sick and the hungry. Christ came into the world and went into action without leaving the Father's side.² The contemplative 'movement' of the apostle is to proceed through Christ's humanity to his Godhead, and to be sent, in Christ, without leaving the Father's side, to share in the divine redemptive work. So in prayer and action alike, and indifferently, we come from God, in Christ, and go to God. 'The mystery we worship is Christ in this world accepted by faith, Christ on high taken up into glory'.³ All tensions are dissolved in him.

¹ Jn 17, 14–19.

² *Verbum supernum prodiens / Nec Patris linguens dexteram / Ad opus suum exiens / Venit ad vitae vesperam.* The hymn of St. Thomas for the feast of Corpus Christi.

³ 1 Tim 3, 16.

If the liturgy is the re-enactment in the Church of Christ's mission in the world, then the communal celebration of the liturgy will necessarily be the framework of all apostolic activity, particularly that of religious communities. It is usually taken that Ignatius Loyola struck a vital blow for apostolic activity when he obtained for his Society freedom from the conventual Mass and recitation of Office in choir. It was not, however, liturgical celebration itself that he considered as limiting apostolic freedom, but its interminable length in his day. Under the new liturgical reform it is possible for all religious communities not merely to punctuate their activity, but to regulate it, with the free rhythm of the Church's prayer. This will involve, for many, a gradual approach, an education in praying with the Church. But again the Holy See has already given the lead. The way in which the faithful are to be educated to full participation in the holy sacrifice can easily be applied by religious communities to the recitation of the Divine Office.

The fact should be faced, as well, that the recitation of the little Office of our Lady was originally introduced into many congregations of women religious not so much as a special mark of devotion to the blessed Virgin but as a *pis aller* for those who had neither the time nor the education to recite the Divine Office. The reasons for the substitution, in most cases, no longer obtain. Still less can it be claimed (as some religious congregations still do) that 'the rosary is the breviary of the Sisters of X'. The psalter, not the rosary, is the communal prayer of the people of God, expressive of all the varying moods and needs of the whole Church, even as it is expressive of the mission and needs of the incarnate Christ. To participate in the *Opus Dei* with the understanding of the Church – and this needs instruction and contemplation – would seem to be the necessary accompaniment which gives resonance, tone and unison to the apostolic action of religious communities. All other communal prayer must be seen for what it is – a substitute for liturgical prayer, or a brief preparation for it; its utility should be judged strictly according to these standards. It would be unreasonable to retain the substitute when and where the original is feasible.

The gospels and the apostolic preaching make it clear that the apostolic ideal, in which the circle of prayer and activity is truly complete, is the sacramental action. Here the priest is easily aware that he is giving the Christ he has received, that Christ's power is at work in him and in his brethren. He is conscious that Christ is ena-

bling him to love according to the divine pattern established in the *Mandatum* of the Last Supper. It is here that Paul's description of the essential apostolate is clearly recognised: 'God who bade light shine out of darkness has kindled a light in our hearts, whose shining is to make known his glory as he has revealed it in the features of Jesus Christ'.¹ The priest's every prayer is liturgical in that it is designed to prepare him for the sacred action of the sacrifice which glorifies the Father – to humble him and to purify him for his role as priest and victim with Christ. And all apostolic activity is a reflection of the same sacrificial love of Christ, according to the simple picture which he drew for us in the *exemplum* of the washing of the feet. The apostle cannot exist without that contemplation of Christ which purifies and enlightens him for this living union and communication. His prayer fits him for the action, and the action leads him again into that knowledge-in-love: 'do you know what I have done for you?'

It is not fanciful to see a close analogy between the contemplation in action which the priest performs in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and every apostolic activity in which 'the love of Christ is the compelling motive'.² It is therefore illogical and unnecessary to insist that the times set aside for private prayer by religious rule are sacrosanct, to be protected at all costs from activity, as long as this activity, whether it is scrubbing floors or teaching nuclear physics, is set firmly in the liturgical context and seen, in faith, for what it is, a sacramental. Here, it is true, the presence and power of Christ is not so immediate as in the sacrament. But Christ is in his world and in his Church, accepted by faith; and all that the apostle handles, every person with whom he comes into contact, will be imbued with the spirit of the same Christ.

Religious superiors will see, then, that there is no optimum length, time or place for private (as opposed to communal) prayer over against apostolic activity. As long as the basic requirements of liturgical prayer are safeguarded – and these include contemplative preparation for the holy sacrifice, they will recognise that they have a responsibility in love to ensure a real freedom for the subjects whom the Lord has confided to their care. They will welcome the reasoned and enlightened direction of their Bishops, who are themselves committed to the same programme of contemplation and action and who understand its tensions, concerning the necessary balance

¹ 2 Cor 4,6.

² 2 Cor 5, 14.

between the spirit of the rule and the current, local, needs of the Church. (And Bishops will encourage their clergy not merely to demand the fruits of contemplation from women religious, but to give them – in the way of frequent and up-to-date biblical and liturgical instruction.)

The individual religious will see that the ebb and flow of consolation, the rise and fall in the level of awareness of the Christ whom they contemplate, will be equally operative in their work as in their prayer. Their prayer, on the whole, will be the dark prayer of faith, of loving, obscure attention; in which Christ is present or absent according to the measure of loving acceptance and recognition of him in the dryness and the darkness. It is to be the same in their activity. In the prayer of faith one is aware of Christ in weakness and inadequacy: the weakness of the human nature in which Christ is incarnate; and this is unitive prayer. In activity also, in its dryness and monotony, in its lack of immediacy, in its distraction and apparent disruption of recollection.¹ Christ is to be sought and found. The apostle accepts and welcomes the irreducible tension in his life and prayer, the constant mortification which the search for Christ entails: 'Always we, alive as we are, are being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the living power of Jesus may be manifested in this mortal nature of ours. So death makes itself felt in us, and life in you'.²

¹ It is perhaps worth recalling, on this point, the letter of St. Ignatius to Fr. Manuel Godinho who felt that his work as procurator of a large college was an obstacle to his union with God: '... Although the charge of temporal affairs appears to be, and is in some sense, distracting, I am certain that your holy intention, and the way in which you direct all that occupies you to the glory of God, makes your work spiritual and most pleasing to the divine Goodness. Distractions taken up for his greater service, and in union with the divine Will which obedience interprets for you, are not only the equivalent of the union and recollection of diligent contemplation but are even more acceptable to God, for they proceed from a stronger and more intense love'.

² 2 Cor 4, 11-12. Cp. the whole chapter.